A WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION
IN CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE
of
DANA LEWESE FERGUSON MYERS
October 31, 2008

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Psalm 121
Psalm 23
***from* Revelation 21**
***from* John 14**
Romans 8:31–39

Something is seriously out of order today. Parents are not supposed to have to bury their children. Older colleagues are not supposed to have to say good-bye to younger colleagues. Friends are not supposed to lose one of their own in the middle of life. Something is seriously out of order, and so we are here to stand close to one another, to share the pain of grief, to gather around Wayne and Daniel and Taylor and Betsy and Liz to offer our love and support and prayers.

And we are here to put this whole matter before God, the one who brought order out of chaos in creation; the one whose steadfast love is the one constant, permanent reality in the midst of every situation, every day, every birth, every death; the one who loves so much as to give an only Son; the one who knows the profound grief of a parent watching a precious child die.

And we are here to remember that God's supreme gift of love did not end with death, that Jesus Christ is risen, and that all of life is now profoundly different, saved, redeemed—even death itself, redeemed. "A Witness to the Resurrection," our Presbyterian church calls this public event, and that is what it is: a celebration of Good News, news so good it will not be contained by our best and most eloquent words. News that must be shouted and sung and played on organ and brass and lived daily in lives that are victorious, safe, secure, loved by God; lives happily given away to God's will and God's kingdom, because nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

Dana Ferguson Myers died much too soon. All of us are here today because we had more living to do with Dana, more working together and praying and worshiping and laughing. Her former colleague and

friend John Wilkinson, when he heard about her death, said simply, “She made us laugh more than anyone,” and she did. We wanted to see what would happen next: we wanted to watch her continue to grow and mature and become the amazing woman God created her to be.

And yet, upon reflection, it seems to me that Dana used up all the life God gave her, lived it joyfully, intentionally, passionately. It won’t cause us to miss her less, but it does occur to me that Dana figured out how to cram seventy or eighty years into forty-two, and that while God shares our grief, God is also smiling and thinking, “That’s what I mean; that life is the way life is to be lived.”

Dana’s formative years were in Batesville, Mississippi; she claimed her heritage, was proud of it, entertained us endlessly with affectionate stories of life in Batesville.

On the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women to ministry in the Presbyterian church—November 6, 2005, three years ago this Sunday—I asked Dana to share the preaching duties and to tell a little about how she came to be where she was. She was at her best that day.

She said that when she graduated from college she gave her parents a plaque that read, “I am because of my parents’ love.” She went on to say, “I am because of the love of many people and because of the love of God.”

She remembered thinking at the age of ten that maybe she’d be a preacher one day, and being so secure in the love of her home and church, she didn’t notice that there weren’t many, if any, women ministers around.

She told us that Betsy, her mother, was the first woman elected elder in that Batesville Presbyterian congregation. And that when Betsy told her mother, a member of a conservative Presbyterian church that does not ordain women, Dana’s grandmother said, “That is just lovely, Betsy, but please don’t tell my friends.”

She told us that her mother was among many important, formative, and formidable women in her life. Both grandmothers were successful businesswomen: Annie Mama and her sister ran a dime store, and Grandmother Ferguson ran the family funeral business. Both were faithful and committed church women.

She named some of the Presbyterian saints who taught her to believe, held her tightly when, in her own words, she was “rebelling as best and hard as I could.”

“They never gave up on me,” Dana said, “never stopped telling me I was one of God’s beloved and chosen. That was a monumental message to me,” Dana said. But it didn’t go without another: “That the world is full of the goodness of God—God’s people and resources—and we are called to the business of sharing.”

“My family, teachers, members, and colleagues taught me over and over that I am important and valued. And that all the world’s people are important and valued, and it is through these people that I have heard God’s affirmation of a call to ministry that I heard even at a very young age.”

After high school, Dana went to Hollins College, now University, where she made dear and lifelong friendships. Hollins’s motto is “I lift up my eyes unto the hills,” from Psalm 121, which Dana asked to be read today.

She met Wayne Myers at Princeton Seminary at a weekend for students thinking about ministry. They became friends, and met again on the first day of the fall term, after both had enrolled at Princeton. The way Dana told the story, Wayne pulled up behind Dana’s car in front of the dormitory. She reintroduced herself, “Hi, I’m Dana Ferguson.” Wayne responded romantically, “Yeah, I know.” It was all the encouragement she needed, and the rest, as they say, is history.

She came to Fourth Church from Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee. The pastor there, her mentor and friend Jim Lowery, recommended her to us. Wayne was coming to Oak Park, Fair Oaks Presbyterian Church, and Dana was available. She was hugely pregnant when she came to my office for a first interview. Wanting not to say anything inappropriate, I didn’t mention it. Finally she said, “You know I’m pregnant, don’t you?” I said yes. She said, “I just want you to know I won’t be this big the next time you see me.”

She had a very distinguished ministry in Memphis, and those formative influences of God’s inclusive love and the human justice that proceeds from it guided her. She led a church initiative to build a transitional housing facility with supporting services, such as job training, to help people move from poverty and homelessness to solvency and independence. She led an after-school education program called Logos and insisted that it include not only the children of Idlewild Church but African American children from the inner city,

and it worked. Wayne said one of his precious memories is seeing black and white children from the Logos program walking hand in hand for ice cream, down the sidewalk in downtown Memphis, a sight not often, if ever, seen at that time.

She arrived at Fourth Presbyterian Church eleven years ago to serve as Associate Pastor for Mission, and her style and vision and commitment were felt immediately. She supervised our existing mission programs and began to think broadly about the next chapter for Fourth Church. She learned about Cabrini-Green and the Chicago Housing Authority's and mayor's plan for transition, a bold experiment in creating an urban community, economically, racially, and socially diverse. "We need to be part of that," she said and went to work talking with politicians, bureaucrats, real estate developers, advocacy groups, community activists. The result was the purchase of a piece of property on Chicago Avenue for a community center, a bridge institution for the newly diverse neighbors. She was rightfully proud of the Chicago Avenue site and the garden that is there currently.

And Dana inspired us to broaden our mission vision to be authentically global. She inspired and led mission trips and Fourth Church investments in Cuba, through the work of the First Presbyterian Church of Havana; Honduras, where Fourth Church purchased property, donated it to Habitat for Humanity, and helped build houses for poor families and single mothers; Israel-Palestine, where Fourth Church worked and invested in both Israel and Palestine; New Orleans, where we have sent several mission teams to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. She insisted on going along and participating in these trips, even when it was apparent that she was not well. There she is, perspiring in the hot Louisiana sun, wearing a carpenter's apron, a bandana on her head, hammer in her hand.

I received an e-mail from a young man who was on one of the trips to New Orleans. He wrote:

> Dana had such a great spirit, and I feel blessed to have been touched by it at least a little. She was the leader of the church trip to New Orleans I was on, and she brought such energy to it; the Habitat folks weren't always completely organized with work assignments for us every morning, and we all laughed that they were afraid of Dana, because she'd get there and get in their face a little until we got our jobs. I also remember one hot afternoon working on hammering in some flooring with Dana and a few others, when the person with the hammer hit their thumb instead of the nail and immediately groaned and dropped the

hammer. Within about, oh, a half second or so, Dana said, “If you’re not using that hammer, pass it over.” Great.

After successfully battling cancer a few years ago, she returned to work, this time as Executive Associate Pastor, responsible for the day-to-day operations of this complex church and its staff. She led with vision, utter dependability, a capacity for details and budgeting and management that was a priceless contribution to this church. It was a job she dearly loved.

In the midst of all that, Dana somehow managed to give priority attention to her marriage, to Wayne and Daniel and Taylor. I don’t know how she did it, but her home was beautiful, her garden neat, her children mostly spotless. Someone gave her a hoodie recently, which hung on her hospital bed, with “Wonder Woman” on the front—and she was.

She was a lover of life, and it expressed itself in her attire: a collection of colorful tights that she somehow managed to coordinate with a clerical collar, great hats at weddings and Easter. I was a beneficiary of her style. A few years ago, she ordered a small television for my office. She said I ought to be able to watch the news or a Cubs game. Not long after it arrived, Dana came to my office with Daniel and Taylor. “What’s up?” I asked. “Oh,” she said, “the boys are going to watch some videos on your new TV. I didn’t think you’d mind.” I kept a card table in my office for small lunches and additional work space. Dana didn’t like my card table, didn’t think it looked appropriate. So without my knowing much about it, she ordered a beautiful classic table, which arrived two days ago.

She was practical, pragmatic, always watching the subtle details of every church function. Before worship she inspected us, ran her eye over everyone to make sure that collars were straight. Two weeks ago she spoke first to Calum MacLeod and then to me about her funeral: what she wanted and didn’t want. She didn’t want this much talk about her; she wanted me to preach a sermon (a full sermon, she said, not one of those little-bitty funeral meditations). I have concluded that her life itself was a more eloquent witness to the gospel than I could compose. She chose the hymns and scripture and particularly wanted the presence of the Morning Choir and Tower Brass, such integral parts of the worship life of the church she so dearly loved.

Dana was a believer. Jesus was her Lord, whom she decided to follow in every way she could. In spite of her flamboyance, her unrestrained laughter, her passionate embrace of life—Elvis Presley, great ribs at a downtown dive in Memphis she insisted I visit once, Cubs baseball

(she was the only woman invited to be a regular part of a posse of fourteen men who attended Opening Day at Wrigley Field together for years)—or perhaps not in spite of but because of that passionate embrace of life, those of us privileged to be close to her knew how deep and authentic her own spirituality was.

She preached with such liveliness and integrity. She complained loudly every time I asked her to preach—and then created a homiletical gem that touched hundreds of lives. And her prayers, who will ever forget them? It was pure, simple poetry as she brought into our prayers the big issues of the day—race and justice, war and peace, health care and education—and the small, intimate matters that are in our hearts—the children going off to school for the first time, parents waving good-bye with tears in their eyes, the college freshman on her own for the first time, excited and afraid.

I had the great privilege of visiting with her in the hospital these past weeks, as did all of her colleagues at one time or another. Calum, who came to Fourth Church at about the same time Dana did, was a particularly close and faithful colleague and friend.

Dana knew, perhaps more than any of us were willing to acknowledge, how very sick she was. This time around she underwent two surgeries and almost daily procedures that were extraordinarily uncomfortable and painful—and never complained. Her resilience and courage will inspire me as long as I live.

On World Communion Sunday, two of her dearest friends, both elders in this church, Beth Davis and Marc Miller, asked if we could take communion to Dana. Ali Trowbridge and I joined them and Allison Chisolm at Dana's bedside Sunday afternoon, October 5. We read scripture, the same passages that were read in the Sunday morning services, prayed, and read the simple communion liturgy. She had not had anything by mouth for weeks, could not have anything by mouth. We hadn't thought about it, frankly. So I said something like, "Dana, you can't actually eat this bread or drink the wine." "I know," she said, "but let me hold it, let me touch it with my lips," and she did, pressing the wafer and little cup to her lips.

Dana preached for the last time on April 20. Her text was the story of the stoning of Stephen. It's a remarkable sermon.

She said if she'd have been a new Christian when Stephen was stoned, she'd be concerned— rip-roaring mad, even. Christ promised life abundant and declared that death is gone, and here comes death storming back.

Dana lived with a heightened sense of her own mortality, and so when she said things like that, you knew they came from deep in her soul.

In that sermon, she talked about Randy Pausch, the Carnegie Mellon professor who had been told that he had only a few months to live and in his own way kept on teaching until the very end, talking openly about what was happening to him. He died on July 25.

Dana quoted from a Diane Sawyer *Nightline* interview in which Sawyer said something about how unfair it all was.

Pausch said, “Don’t think it’s unfair. I was unlucky, but it wasn’t unfair.”

Dana reflected, “Unfair. It’s how we often want to characterize things when a loved one has gotten bad news. But Pausch is right: it may be tragic, heart-wrenching, ill-timed, illogical, debilitating. So we gather as people have for generations to grieve and console one another. Yet as deep and real as our grief may be, it isn’t death that is unfair.”

And then, with integrity and simple eloquence out of her own experience, Dana preached the gospel of Jesus Christ: “For you see,” she said, “life is a gift.”

> It is a gift that comes to us free and clear. At the beginning we are given no guarantees or warranties or agreements. Unfair is when we’ve been assured one thing will happen and another does. That isn’t the case here. There is a promise that comes with life in Christ and it is this: “I will be with you always.” That’s it. That’s the promise. And it’s here and now for which we continually strive. But it doesn’t end there. It goes on eternally. Jesus says to the disciples, “When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” When all is done here on earth, all isn’t done for us in Christ. In fact, all is made complete.

A few decades after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, St. Paul is writing to a small community of believers in Rome. He’s trying to find words for an orderly presentation of the gospel. It’s the first attempt at a Christian theology. And in the middle of the letter, he’s thinking about the future, which for him, at the moment, is not very promising.

> I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the

> creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

And then Paul asks the fundamental religious question, “What is to become of us?” and stammers an answer:

> If God is for us who can be against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or sword?”

We might add debilitating illness, slow, progressively profound, mysteriously undiagnosable illness.

“No,” Paul almost shouts, “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

And then the powerful, precious witness:

> I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I saw her the afternoon before she died. I recited that passage as nearly as I could before we prayed. When I left, she was alone momentarily, I turned to look one more time through the glass of her ICU room. I waved, and she summoned a smile and a tiny wave. And I thought, “This is what St. Paul meant, and Dana knows it.” In the midst of everything that was happening to her, Paul’s phrase “more than conquerors” occurred to me.

In the midst of everything that was happening to her, Dana was and is safe, secure, in the embrace of the God from whom nothing in creation can separate her—or us.

God loved Dana while she lived, and she knew it.
God loves her now—and forever.
Thanks be to God.